

JC 57 book review

Junk Dealer

By Chuck Kleinhans

Jon Davies, *Trash* (Queer Film Classic series). Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009.

Following in the tradition of the very successful British Film Institute series of short books on individual notable films, the Queer Film Classic series appeals to both students and fans, a more general cinephile audience, and in this case some people interested in queer themes more than cinema per se. Jon Davies' contribution serves all these constituencies by examining a fairly well respected cult film from 1970 by director Paul Morrissey.

The film went to market under the producer credit of Andy Warhol, at a time when the famous celebrity artist was a popular icon. It also entered the scene with an X rating, thus assuring it would never appear in rural and suburban screens, but would have a niche in some urban centers. And it continued a cycle of arty features starring figures from the Warhol Factory, in this case hunky hustler Joe Dellesandro and transgender heroine Holly Woodlawn.

Most viewers who sought out the film initially, or who came across it in revivals or later on VHS or DVD editions found it a fairly entertaining very low budget feature mixing a

hip blend of satiric comic melodrama, tinged with the lure of Factory personalities. What Davis adds to understanding and appreciating the film is very thorough research on the director's personality and intention. Morrissey had a deeply conservative bent and thought the film's message was that the people depicted were losers, the detritus of society. Joe moves through various scenes as just a body (though a conventionally attractive and muscular one) holding out a sexual promise for others, but in fact just seeking to shoot up heroin. As a result, he can never deliver the sex part, only drift off into his own private oblivion. In counterpoint, the other half of the couple is represented by Holly, who is in endless motion and talk, and who presents as a street person foraging for discarded materials (the other kind of junk). The raw narrative (Morrissey wrote the script which is supplemented by improvisation) is open to interpreting the director's disgust with the lower depths of New York.

But in actual experience of the work, the two stars command the screen and disrupt the intention. Joe remains a beautiful body into which we all, male and female, straight and queer, can project our fantasies. That his addicted passiveness is most of his screen time is no problem, rather it is precisely why he remains a fascinating object for our gaze. Meanwhile, Holly is not only an industrious worker as a garbage picker, she is a planner, hoping for a better future. And in the film's finest satiric climax Holly triumphs when confronting a little toad of a bureaucrat from the welfare office. Although her claim to be pregnant and need Aid for Dependent Children fails when it turns out her belly is a pillow, not a 9 month fetus, she still demands her rights as woman and mother.

Along the route of his analysis Davies, like the perfect tour guide exhaustingly covers everything there is to know about *Trash*: relation to other Warhol and Morrissey works, production details, critical reception, theories of camp, place within queer cultural studies, afterlives of the principals. I could say it tells too much, like the over-eager undergraduate doing a Senior Thesis on a beloved topic. But, hey, it's a little book and you can just skip ahead or around, as you tune in and out of the tour guide's patter and decide to look at some detail, or think about something else before he points to the next site and sight.

Morrissey intended a sour, mean naturalism to push an arch conservative agenda. Holly Woodlawn, through superb performance (including gender performance) transformed the film into a celebration of gender equality: one of the first trans cinema anthems.

Caption:

Holly's miscarriage: Standing to demand the welfare agent stop trying to coerce her,

Holly's baby bump pillow falls to the floor.